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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001632

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KWBG](#) [IS](#) [GAZA](#) [DISENGAGEMENT](#) [GOI](#) [INTERNAL](#) [ISRAELI](#) [PALESTINIAN](#) [AFFAIRS](#)

SUBJECT: FOG REMAINS FOLLOWING SHARON WIN ON VAGUE

DISENGAGEMENT PLAN SPEECH

Classified By: Political Counselor Norm Olsen for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary and comment: Following a vaguely-worded speech that was supposed to be about his disengagement plan, PM Sharon turned a March 15 Knesset vote on that speech into a so-called "vote of confidence" on his government -- which he won 46-45, with 29 members absent. The vote, however close, meant little since only the opposition can call for a "no-confidence" vote aimed at toppling a government, and even then, a no-confidence vote requires 61 votes to pass. Sharon's tactics nonetheless resulted in the right-wing coalition partners absenting themselves from the confidence vote rather than voting against Sharon's speech, and demonstrating these parties' desire to stay in the coalition. Media pundits and politicians agreed that while the speech revealed nothing new about Sharon's strategy for disengagement, the vote demonstrated the dissension within the coalition. In any event, PM Sharon's tactics successfully steered the Knesset away from a vote on disengagement, leaving observers still in the fog about the plan itself and whether the plan could win a Knesset majority. End summary.

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Sharon Follows Adept Parliamentary Tactics...  
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12. (C) At the initiative of the left-wing Meretz party, which collected the required signatures of 40 MKs, PM Sharon was required under Knesset rules to appear before the body March 15 to discuss his disengagement plan. Sharon reportedly wisely followed the advice of coalition whip Gideon Sa'ar (Likud), and, at the last minute, turned a vote on his speech into a vote of confidence on the government, which he won, 46-45. (Note: Votes of "confidence," even if lost, have no ramifications for the government other than possible embarrassment and loss of credibility. An opposition-called "no-confidence" motion, which must also nominate an alternative candidate for prime minister, can topple a government if approved by a Knesset majority of 61 votes.) Sa'ar rightly banked on the two right-wing coalition parties -- the National Religious Party (NRP) and the National Union -- not wanting to vote against their own government. According to Shinui Party advisor Yoram Levy, Sa'ar had met with the NRP before the plenary to reach some sort of compromise. In any event, the NRP and National Union MKs absented themselves rather than vote against the government. According to the published voting record, 10 Likud members also were absent from the vote.

13. (C) Sharon reportedly also followed Sa'ar's advice to avoid providing any details about his disengagement plan and to exclude any reference to such controversial catch-phrases as "painful concessions," and even the word "disengagement." The speech was little more than Sharon's appeal, in what he said is the absence of a Palestinian partner, for Israel to act proactively, thereby preventing a political vacuum from being filled by any one of "dozens" of more damaging plans -- such as the Saudi proposal. Sharon noted that National Security Council chief Giora Eiland is currently formulating the plan, and promised that when the government approves a detailed disengagement plan, he will submit it to the Knesset for a vote.

14. (C) Opposition MKs complained that they were still in the dark about Sharon's plan. Shas MK Amnon Cohen griped to poloff on March 16 that Sharon's speech did not reveal any information on which West Bank settlements Sharon proposes to dismantle, and that no solution was proposed for who would "supervise" the Gaza Strip after an Israeli withdrawal. He underlined that Shas cannot take a position until it knows more about the plan. Labor leader Shimon Peres accused Sharon of not even having a plan.

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Coalitions Can Teeter for a Long Time  
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15. (C) Media pundits and some MKs say the close vote of confidence demonstrates just how shaky the coalition is. Shinui advisor Levy speculated that "Sharon is losing control of the coalition." He also pointed to the absence of 10 Likud MKs as indicative of Sharon's problems within Likud.

Meretz MK Roman Bronfman asserted to poloff on March 16 that it was just a matter of time before the NRP and National Union leave the coalition and that Sharon was actively coordinating with Peres to form a unity government. Bronfman emphasized that, in fact, it was Peres who did all of Sharon's work at the Knesset plenary by "speaking against" the right-wing parties after they criticized Sharon. He said that Peres "harshly" accused these parties of providing no alternatives to Sharon's plan. He speculated that Sharon would use the March 25-May 2 Knesset recess to work with Peres to form a coalition and to gain Likud support for a unity government. Shas MK Cohen questioned whether Sharon could muster the necessary Likud votes to support a coalition with Labor. Shinui MK Ronny Brizon, however, commented to poloff on March 16 that "many coalitions and governments in Israel have teetered on the brink for a very long time." He stressed that these votes were only an indication of problems, not a sign of an impending collapse of the coalition.

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If It's Monday, It Must be No-Confidence Day  
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16. (SBU) While the media often depicts the now weekly Monday no-confidence votes on Sharon's government as close calls for Sharon, none of these votes have come close to bringing down the government. Following are various types of Knesset votes and their ramifications for the GOI:

-- Vote on PM's policy speech: The Knesset can vote to approve or disapprove policy speeches. If Sharon had allowed a straight Knesset vote on his disengagement speech, despite the fact that it contained no details of his plan or even referred to dismantling settlements, it was likely that the NRP and National Union -- as well as some Likud members -- would have voted against the speech. This might have been embarrassing for Sharon on the broader issue of disengagement, but it would not have had any concrete ramifications for the government.

-- Vote of confidence in the government: A vote of confidence, which is a government-initiated action, has symbolic significance for the government. If Sharon had lost this vote it would have been embarrassing, but, again, would not result in the fall of the government.

-- No-confidence votes: A motion of no-confidence, which may only be called by the opposition, can bring down the government if approved by a majority of all Knesset members, or 61 votes, and if the party calling for the vote also submits a nomination for a replacement, with a signed letter from that nominee that he or she agrees to form a government. All of the no-confidence votes taken to date on the Sharon government -- called on a weekly basis in the last couple of months -- have been close tallies yea and nay, but nowhere near the 61 votes needed, and there has been no indication that the parties calling the votes have had any replacements in mind.

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